

## **Running on empty**

May 7, 2006

WHEN IT comes to nonsolutions to the gasoline price run-up, the \$100 rebate suggested by Senate Republicans takes the prize, but a close second is President Bush's plea to Congress to give him authority to change car fuel-efficiency standards. The country learned just how empty this gesture was when Transportation Secretary Norman Y. Mineta admitted to Congress Wednesday that the president had no specific increase in the standard in mind and could promise no overall savings in fuel.

Contrast that with a proposal studied by the National Academy of Sciences just as the Bush administration was beginning. That study concluded that the auto industry *then* had the technological know-how to raise average efficiency from the currently mandated 27.5 miles per gallon to 33 miles in 10 years, without compromising on safety. If this standard were set now, by 2025 it would be saving the country 2.6 million barrels of oil a day, about 14 percent of our current daily oil consumption for all purposes.

It isn't as though the industry has been making no improvements in design since President Ford first signed the auto efficiency law back in 1975. But they have gone overwhelmingly toward making cars more powerful, not toward greater fuel economy.

Bush had the choice in 2001 to back the National Academy proposal as part of his energy plan. After Sept. 11 of that year, he could have presented this reform as a patriotic response to Islamic terrorism, which gets much of its funding indirectly from the oil revenues going to Mideast countries. If he had acted then, terrorists now might have less money and there would be less demand for oil pushing up prices at the pump.

The proposal the president now has in mind is to rewrite the fuel economy law entirely by dividing passenger cars into different weight classes with separate standards for each. This is what the administration did earlier this year with the standard for SUVs and pickups, which resulted in an anemic 8 percent gain in fuel economy for these vehicles. Mineta said rewriting the law this way would take years and he had not even met with auto industry leaders to discuss it.

If a far-off, 8 percent gain in efficiency is all the administration has in mind for passenger cars, Congress should legislate its own increase. One bill sponsored by Republican Representative Sherwood Boehlert of New York and Democratic Representative Edward Markey of Malden would use the 33 miles per gallon standard and would also require SUVs to be counted with passenger cars in figuring overall averages for each automaker. The United States would enjoy more energy independence, emit fewer greenhouse gases, and send fewer petrodollars to terrorists if it made this change in the fuel efficiency law.